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Muilenburg, John and Virginia Oral History Interview: Old China Hands Oral History Project

Julie Van Wyk

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OLD CHINA HANDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

John and Virginia Muilenburg

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
1978

Introduction to the Series

These interviews are part of a series of interviews conducted by the Hope College Old China Hands Oral History Project during the summer of 1976 with former missionaries to China. With one exception, these missionaries were sent out by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America.

These interviews have been transcribed from taped conversations. While both the Old China Hands Staff and the interviewees edited the interviews, a strong attempt has been made to maintain the integrity of the transcript in relation to the taped interview. Editing has been primarily for clarification and to a certain extent for correction. A very serious effort has been made to leave the transcripts conversational and reflective of the tone of the interviews. The tapes themselves are held by the Hope College Archives.

The reader should thus keep in mind that these interviews are conversations and not polished essays. Neither the Old China Hands Staff, nor the Hope College Archives makes any claim that every aspect of an interviewee's recollections are correct. In fact, although the staff has attempted to point out obvious discrepancies and clarify murky areas, we know the opposite is true: there are areas where the interview will not be in accord with other evidence. It remains for the scholar and researcher to discover and sift through these areas.

Without the scholarly imagination and perseverance of Dr. G. Larry Penrose and Dr. Elton Bruins, this project would not have been possible. Even though very busy with their own pursuits, they always lent their valuable support and advice. Nor would it have been possible without the strong support of Dean Jacob Nyenhuis and Hope College. It was made enjoyable by the interviewees, each one very cooperative, genial and interesting.

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Preface

Interviewees: John and Virginia Muilenberg

Interview: July 2, 1977
Upper Montclair, New Jersey

Interviewer: Miss Julie Van Wyk
Senior, Hope College

INTERVIEW

VAN WYK: Could you tell me how you decided to become a missionary to China?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes. The impetus for being a missionary goes way back to my childhood in that my father, being a pastor in South Holland, Illinois and being very mission-minded, constantly had missionaries in our home. I remember very well when Sam Zwemer came to our house and I was a little boy--that he took me on his lap and he said, "Now, I think you're going to be a minister and probably a missionary. When you come to be ordained I want to preach your ordination sermon." Incidentally, when I did get ordained in 1938 Dr. Sam Zwemer did actually come and preach the sermon. So there were these childhood influences. In addition to that I do believe that there was a time during the war, beginning in early 1941 and up to late 1942, when I felt a strong urge to leave the pastorate in this country and to go to China. I think that an important element in this decision was the fact that so many of my generation, young men, were being forced to enter the services, and I, being a minister, was deferred. That was not a very comfortable situation for me and I felt that it would be a kind of a similar service--not just to my country, but to the Chinese and for the well-being of the world, taking a broad view--to offer myself for this service.

VAN WYK: Was there any reason why you chose China over another field?

MR. MUILENBURG: No. I think I would have gone anywhere. It just so happened that it was in China that they needed missionaries at that time.

VAN WYK: How did you feel about going along with your husband as a missionary

to China?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well, I had not thought in particular, either of a country, but I was teaching high school at the time John came into my life in Piedmont, California when he came to Berkeley to Language School. We met at the Presbyterian church where we were both teaching Sunday school. I had been thinking very deeply about Christian service, rather than than teaching, for some time and had been praying about it. I had a Christian background, so when I knew what his plans were and he asked me to go with him, I was very, very happy to do this, and I had the full support of my parents, too, in this, which helped.

VAN WYK: What kind of preparation did you have before you went to China?

MR. MUILENBURG: We had excellent preparation from the point of view of language as well as general cultural studies for China. When I finally did receive my appointment for China, it was in 1942 and the war, of course, was on. It was impossible to go to China, so we were sent to begin our study of Mandarin Chinese in Berkeley, California. It was there that Virginia and I met, and we studied Mandarin as well as the written form, and along with that, all kinds of cultural, historical studies, which were extremely valuable. So I feel we did get a good preparation.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I had just a semester of that because I had to finish my teaching contract.

VAN WYK: Did you study any Amoy Chinese before you went to China?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes. The last half a year that we were in Berkeley we began to study some Amoy in addition to our Mandarin. This was very difficult to mix up the two dialects at this stage of our facility in the Chinese languages, and I found this extremely difficult and didn't do too well on the Amoy. I

thought it was more important to consolidate the Mandarin.

VAN WYK: Now when you first got to China you had a year of language studies?

MR. MUILENBURG: We had at least another year of Amoy, or perhaps a year and a half.

MRS. MUILENBURG: We had some more at Cornell.

MR. MUILENBURG: That's right. We studied also at Cornell University. But that was mainly agricultural studies and not Chinese. So we had several years on the Chinese language--surely, good preparation.

VAN WYK: Did you have any problems adjusting to life in Tung-an when you got there?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well, I remember very clearly when we first arrived in Tung-an, and you probably have heard this from some of the other missionaries you've interviewed. We arrived at Christmastime in Amoy and had to wait around for, oh, several weeks until the New Year's season had progressed sufficiently to free some carriers to take our things inland. But they were still celebrating inland, particularly the birthday of the Heavenly Grandfather. I remember this in relation to culture shock. A Buddhist impromptu temple, looking very makeshift, had been set up for the occasion. In front they had two enormous skinned, stuffed pigs, bigger than I had ever seen, decorated with colored markings, and red banners and streamers around, and Chinese characters telling what the occasion was. All night long there were gongs and cymbals and merry-making for several nights after we arrived there. This was really quite a shock, to come into this kind of celebration. I remember that experience particularly. I suppose there were other areas of shock. I think the lack of hygiene--sanitary niceties that we were accustomed to--was difficult for me,

and I remember specifically that you were just never out of sight or smell of human excrement. This was hard to get used to, but I think we did get used to it.

MR. MUILENBURG: I think it certainly was inevitable that Americans moving into an interior Chinese setting would find all kinds of situations developing which were so different from anything we were accustomed to: religion, customs, the family, language. Yes, we certainly had culture shock, but I don't think that we ever suffered under it to the point where we were unable to function. I know there are people who simply are so struck by the whole change in style of life they simply become non-functional. Thank God we never faced that.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I don't know whether you'd classify this as culture shock or not, but one of the difficulties we experienced in moving into this culture was that our children were such a source of surprise to the Chinese. Of course, you must have heard this from your parents, too. They wanted to touch, and carry, and pick up, and so forth, so that when we went down the streets there were just crowds and crowds of people following, just to see the children, or us. I don't know which was the greater fascination.

VAN WYK: What were your responsibilities in Tung-an besides language study, or did you have any?

MR. MUILENBURG: Nothing very specific. We were told that our job was to learn the language and that this was absolutely primary. And we had, of course, certain examinations to meet. Within the set period of time, we had a curriculum to cover, so there was not much time for extra things. Toward the end of our period in Tung-an--we were only there for about nine months, I think--we did go out occasionally to some of the outlying villages with a movie projector and tried to hold evangelistic meetings, but there wasn't a great deal of that as

far as our life was concerned. One of the big problems that we faced in Tung-an was the presence of tigers. I don't know if anybody told you about tigers in Tung-an, but this was a source of considerable nervousness on our part.

MRS. MUILENBURG: At night. At night, well, and I guess during the day, too. During the afternoon if you went far from the house, or if you went to the sugar cane fields or into the mountains, tigers were a danger. Joe Esther has written of this extensively in his book. You may or may not have read it.

VAN WYK: Not yet. I'm eager to read it.

MRS. MUILENBURG: It's very interesting.

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes, we were there with Joe Esther. I suppose you've interviewed Joe.

VAN WYK: No, we haven't been out to California.

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, in his book he tells about our experiences at that time with the tigers. They would come down from the mountains because there wasn't enough food there. And one morning we went out in our garden and found a huge tiger track.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Actually it was in the Esthers' garden.

MR. MUILENBURG: Was it the Esthers' garden? Anyway, this caused us no little concern, as you can imagine, and we didn't dare go out at night except with brilliant lights and tin pans, banging tin pans, and the group would escort each one home, but there was always one last person who had to get home.

(laughter) And we had a tragic incident in which a tiger--right about dusk--jumped over the wall and grabbed a girl who was washing dishes outside the hospital. And the tiger grabbed the girl and jumped over the wall with her

in his mouth and dragged her up in the mountains and simply devoured her. We found the remains a little bit later. So it was kind of a scary business, you know.

VAN WYK: How did your evangelistic meetings go? You say you did some of that from Tung-an.

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, there was tremendous interest in the movies. I remember in several places we'd set up the equipment. We'd carry our own generator and screen and so on, and we'd have meetings out of doors, and the people came from miles around to see these movies. You know, they had never seen them. We would show health clinic films, and I remember one incident when the Chinese were shown a picture of a fly in this health film. Of course it was blown up very big and it was pointed out how dangerous flies were. And this little guy said, "No wonder the Americans are so scared of them if their flies are that big." (laughter) But I think there was great interest. My Amoy Chinese was so rudimentary at that stage, I didn't even attempt to preach. One of the Chinese colleagues did the preaching. We simply did the technical work of providing the equipment.

VAN WYK: Was it the new equipment that drew the crowds mostly?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Curiosity about the Americans, too. Some of them had never seen an American.

MR. MUILENBURG: Curiosity. The Americans, yes, but I think they didn't see movies very often. This is a very good technique of getting a crowd together, if you can show good films.

MRS. MUILENBURG: You showed religious films as well, in addition to health films.

MR. MUILENBURG: That's right.

VAN WYK: Now, when you went to Kulangsu, were the living conditions significantly different?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Yes. Yes, they were. Amoy/Kulangsu was a port city and had received influences of the British and other nationalities for many years, and I think it was much more like an American city. Certainly there were many of the modern influences that we were used to. I don't remember that we had running water. We still had to have our water drawn, and things like that. And there wasn't any plumbing or anything like that.

MR. MUILENBURG: We did have electricity.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Yes, there was electricity.

MR. MUILENBURG: Then there was quite a large foreign community living on the island of Kulangsu, and it was a much more sophisticated atmosphere, from both the point of view of the fact that there were many westerners there as well as Chinese who had studied abroad.

VAN WYK: Now, the university you taught at, was that on Amoy Island?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes. This was the Amoy National University, and when we had finished our examinations in Tung-an we were called back to Amoy, Kulangsu for the purpose of doing student work at the university.

VAN WYK: Can you explain what student work is?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, this was a large national university, and the students there were from many parts of China--a rather significantly large number of Christian students, but of course the majority not being Christian. During

the Nationalist era the university was wide open for various influences, among them Christian, and so the Y.M.C.A. had built a student center--a Christian student center--on the campus. And we carried on a very vital, active program in that student center of worship, of handicrafts, of studies--social studies, English classes. I guess that would be about it.

MRS. MUILENBURG: You have some lectures in history.

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes, I have lectures. I was on the staff of the faculty there and lectured in history--American history. There was a great interest in that at that time.

VAN WYK: Now, what language were you using at the university there?

MR. MUILENBURG: In my social contacts and work in the student center it was Mandarin, and I perhaps was chosen to do this work because I always felt more at ease in Mandarin than I did in Amoy, and I think I did better in Mandarin. It was necessary to use Mandarin in the university, but I gave my lectures on American history in English.

VAN WYK: Were you also involved in the university at this time?

MRS. MUILENBURG: No, I really didn't go out much beyond the church and a few women's meetings, in which I mostly just sat and listened. I still was busy with the children and learning the language, and I don't believe I got into any work at all. I don't remember anything. Do you?

MR. MUILENBURG: Except that we often had students in our home. We entertained them in our home, and we tried to teach them square dancing on our roof top. Remember we had these parties on the roof top with students?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Right.

MR. MUILENBURG: And we would have musical evenings. We had a record player which the students liked and a piano. We tried to make our home available to them in these ways.

VAN WYK: Were there other missionaries of other denominations involved at the university as well?

MR. MUILENBURG: I don't recall that there were. The student center was run primarily by a Chinese lady, a Y.W.C.A. person, and I. We were the two staff people. I can't recall, but I don't think there were other denominational people there.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I don't think there were.

MR. MUILENBURG: Plus, when we were working in China we were not particularly designated by denomination. We all worked within the Church of Christ in China, and our denominational background was definitely secondary, although we were always aware of it. We had three major denominations working in our area in connection with the Church of Christ in China: the London Missionary Society, and the English Presbyterians, and the R.C.A..

MRS. MUILENBURG: Was this a comity arrangement that had been set up? It had been agreed beforehand what denominations would work where?

MR. MUILENBURG: I suppose there may have been something like that.

VAN WYK: Now, was the Y.M.C.A. the sole Christian organization at the school, or were there others?

MR. MUILENBURG: I'm not aware of any other formal Christian efforts being made by any other group than the Y.M.C.A..

MRS. MUILENBURG: You know, I'm trying to remember if there was a Christian

church in Amoy, or was it only in Kulangsu?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh no. My goodness, there were some strong churches in Amoy. As a matter of fact, the earliest Christian church in that area was in Amoy. Don't you remember we used to sing duets in one of those churches in Amoy?

MRS. MUILENBURG: I had forgotten about that. This was my sole contribution, singing in various places.

VAN WYK: The students who were involved in the Christian center, what sort of activities did they carry out? Were they involved in evangelism themselves?

MR. MUILENBURG: I think so, in that there were some very devout young people related to this student center, and they worked on their classmates, I'm sure--brought them to the meetings. We had regular Sunday afternoon meetings and Bible study classes. Along toward the end of the time we were there, we got the idea that we should get involved in raising food. There was a food shortage in the area, and so I remember the Christian Youth Center people got permission to cultivate a large plot that the university owned. And we went out and boys and girls together planted potatoes. And this may have been partly the influence of the Communists who stressed that kind of thing--the importance of university people getting their hands in the soil and working, learning to know what it means to be a worker. And I have a feeling that this may have been influential in the group's decision to go into this kind of activity.

VAN WYK: Were you aware at that point of Communist influences within the Y.M.C.A.?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh yes. A lot of the young people who came to the Youth Center had read deeply in Communist writings--surreptitiously, I'm sure, but still, in some of the things that they said--they had to be very careful, of

course--but it was obvious that they were conversant with Communist ideas and ideology. And I suppose they were sympathetic, and maybe they were trying to--some of them--to infiltrate the group. That was pretty dangerous work because within the last year the Nationalists got very rough on many students who showed the slightest tendency towards sympathy with the Communist movement and actually killed quite a few of them at one point.

VAN WYK: Some of the students from your own group?

MR. MUILENBURG: Some of our own group, as well as others in the university.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I remember they made midnight raids, taking students out of their beds, and they just were never heard from again.

VAN WYK: Do you think the majority of the Y.M.C.A. or the Youth Center students had Communist leanings?

MR. MUILENBURG: No. I don't think so. Not at the time. I think after the Communists took over, why, they soon fell in line. But I think most of the ones in the Christian Student Center activities were not Communists.

MRS. MUILENBURG: But I think they were disenchanted with Chiang's regime and the way he was running the country.

MR. MUILENBURG: No doubt about that.

VAN WYK: Was that true from the time you got there?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, we were there, of course, in very, very hectic times--from 1946 to 1950--and that was a wild time in China with devaluation, inflation, war, and all kinds of disturbances.

VAN WYK: Were students in the university generally quite interested in politics?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh yes. The thing is, it was dangerous to really talk about it, and in the Christian Student Center we did not get involved in political discussions. At least I, as an American, specifically stayed away from that because I knew it could be very dangerous. The Nationalist government had spies all over and were simply listening. And kind of statement which would show leaning to Communism would be exceedingly dangerous for that student. So we did not get involved openly in discussions on these matters during those years, although I'm sure it was a matter of intense interest to these students.

VAN WYK: Was there an active student council at the university?

MR. MUILENBURG: I don't think so.

VAN WYK: Did you find students who were strongly behind Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes. How sincere it actually was or not--it may have been a matter of survival. Of course, that was dangerous, too, because after the Communists came over, these statements and these students could be held up as reactionary, and so it was a very delicate time for students, and many of them chose to be noncommittal. Wouldn't you say that?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Yes, that was my impression.

VAN WYK: You talk about staying away from politics because of the Nationalists. Were you also kept away from teaching certain subjects at the university, or did you feel any censorship in other areas?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, I only taught this one course in American history, and they were very glad at that time to have the students find an exposure to American ideals. They tried to claim adherence to democracy, and so they

welcomed an American to interpret American ways of thinking--especially politically--to their students. So I felt actually no censorship. It was an entirely different matter after the Communists came in, I can assure you. We can get to that later.

VAN WYK: Okay. Was there a large foreign faculty at your school?

MR. MUILENBURG: No. No, I'm trying to think now. I would say there may have been only two or three foreigners teaching on the faculty, and that probably not full-time. No, it was rather strictly limited in that respect.

VAN WYK: Was the Y.M.C.A. critical of--I guess there weren't very many foreigners, but were they critical of the foreigners that were there? Did you ever feel criticism by the Y.M.C.A.?

MR. MUILENBURG: No, I didn't. No, we felt very much at home. One of our close friends on Kulangsu was on the staff of the International Y.M.C.A..

VAN WYK: This was a Chinese?

MR. MUILENBURG: No, this was an American. As far as I know, he was completely free to operate. But we certainly never got any criticism.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I remember Mrs. Ting. She was the head of the Y.W.C.A.. She was very friendly. Hadn't she travelled abroad?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh yes. She'd spent a great deal of time in the USA.

MRS. MUILENBURG: And we certainly didn't feel any kind of hostility at all.

VAN WYK: Did the Christian students feel any hostility from the other students on campus? Do you know of any antagonism between Christians and non-Christians among students?

MR. MUILENBURG: No, I think that there was quite an open attitude on the part of the students toward each other on matters of religion. I think toward the end, as the tension between the Communists and the Nationalists grew in intensity, that those students who were secretly--because they couldn't be open about it--but who were secretly sympathetic to the movement of Communism felt that adherence to Christianity was an adherence to a western thing, and that missionaries were tools of the western imperialism and so on, and that they were simply being duped into something. I'm sure that there was this element, but you see, it would have been dangerous to openly express this.

VAN WYK: So you never had to reply to those feelings, then?

MR. MUILENBURG: No, no. It was quite a free atmosphere for us to work in. Of course, that's not to minimize the deep and intense division within the society at that time. I'm sure there were many, many people who felt that nothing could be worse than their present situation, and that the Communists certainly wouldn't be anything worse, and they might, if they kept their promises, make things a lot better. But you couldn't say that openly.

VAN WYK: Why don't we get on then to the Communist take-over and how that affected some of these things. The Y.M.C.A., what happened to that after the take-over?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, when the Communists took over Amoy, they of course moved into the university immediately. I don't think that they actually removed the president or any of the faculty, but their presence was very strongly felt in terms of being the power behind the administration. Now, the Y.M.C.A. program of the Student Center there was permitted to continue. We were not forced to close our operation. We were allowed to have worship in the early months of the take-over, but it was very clear that the kind of group study which would

be carried on would no longer be Biblically centered. Immediately upon the take-over by the Communists, small groups were organized all over the university and, of course, in the student center to begin serious study of Mao's teachings, and along with it serious and deep probing of each person as to his own thoughts: were they backward, did they need to be cleaned up, and was there a deep understanding of Mao and what he said? And so there were long, long sessions of students poring over Mao's writings and trying to understand the significance of it, and all the students had to participate. And I also participated in that. I was permitted to join the group in the student center that was studying, you see, and I did my best to read the Mao material, and entered into the discussion. Although I was not forced out of it, I was made to feel quite uncomfortable--that I was really out of order by attending these meetings. The presence of an American, their former friend, a Christian missionary, somehow wasn't appropriate. They couldn't speak as openly perhaps as they would want to. So gradually I got the message and dropped out. But I tried to make the effort to show some understanding.

VAN WYK: Did any feeling come out in these meetings about America's aid to Chiang Kai-shek?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh yes, of course. Mao's attack on the whole missionary movement as being really a tool of western--specifically American--imperialistic designs on China, and they went back into the whole history of it, and a very strong case can be made for the fact that missionaries were enthusiastic propagators not only of the gospel, but of the western ideal--the western American way of life. That whole bit. I think a very strong case could be made, and Mao made it, certainly, and the student leaders. And of course, a part of the whole technique was the necessity for people to confess their wrong thought, their wrong thinking, their wrong attitudes, and that of their

colleagues, and friends, and relatives, and their own parents.

VAN WYK: In the initial meetings that you attended, did you notice students not accepting this Communist view on missionaries at the beginning, defending the missionaries at first, and did this die down later? Were you able to follow that through?

MR. MUILENBURG: I don't think that, I don't recall that there was any defense. Everybody was just, you know, leaning over backwards to show that they now understood the new ideology, and the students by and large just jumped on the bandwagon. At least that's my impression. It was the thing to do.

VAN WYK: Did you continue to have students come over to your house after that, or was there some fear of being associated with you?

MR. MUILENBURG: I think some of our very closest students would come, but we had to stop large gatherings; at least that's my impression. What do you think, Virginia?

MRS. MUILENBURG: That's the way I remember it, that it just tapered off. And they were so busy attending the meetings that were called by the new leadership that they really didn't have much free time besides working in the fields. They immediately started scheduled work around the campus in the fields and so forth.

VAN WYK: Expanding on the Y.M.C.A.'s program?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Yes, yes. And going out and helping them harvest rice and so forth. They had so little free time that the students coming to our house dropped off. Instead we started getting the Liberation Army soldiers

coming in to visit us and trying to convert us to their way of thinking. I remember several conversations. They were very earnest propagators of their faith.

VAN WYK: Done in a friendly, polite way?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Yes, they weren't objectionable. They were very enthusiastic, and certainly tried hard to convince us, and voices grew loud sometimes, but no force.

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, the immediate effect of the take-over was the fact that I was relieved of my post for teaching American history. I'm not sure that they even kept the course going, but if they did, they certainly wanted it taught from quite a different slant than one I would give.

VAN WYK: You never were given that course back?

MR. MUILENBURG: No. No. And gradually we were made to feel that it would be better if we didn't even go to the student center anymore, so slowly we simply dropped out of the life of the university.

VAN WYK: What did you do then during the last, how many months is this before you left?

MR. MUILENBURG: About ten months, I think.

MRS. MUILENBURG: About ten months.

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, there wasn't really very much to do.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Because they wouldn't allow us to go outside of Amoy and Kulangsu, either. We couldn't take trips upcountry anymore, or evangelistic trips the way we used to. We attended church and had church meetings, and

that was about it, wasn't it? The mission schools, of course, were being carried on in Kulangsu.

MR. MUILENBURG: Toward the end we didn't even attend the church very much because we began to get the message that we were an embarrassment.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Just complicating life for the Chinese Christians.

MR. MUILENBURG: One of the things that I tried to do was translate certain materials, documents, that came to my attention which they would not get in the upcountry areas.

VAN WYK: Communist documents?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes. I'd translate them into English and would send them upcountry for people who would not have the opportunity to see this stuff. Just to help all the community to know what was going on. We had opportunities to get materials that didn't get to interior areas.

VAN WYK: Let's go back a bit, and can you tell me something about the situation of the Communist take-over, how that was carried out in Amoy?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, that was a very interesting and dramatic period in our lives. Maybe I'll go back and tell about the experience I had in getting back into China after the Communists had almost taken over. Then Virginia can tell a little bit about some of her experiences. When it was clear that we were going to stay in China through the Communist, what appeared to be the Communist take-over, imminent take-over, and not knowing what the future would hold, we felt that it was important that we get certain medicines which we were running short of which we might not be able to get in there-- certain kinds of food, I think I needed some new glasses, some vitamins, and

stuff like that.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Which wasn't just for ourselves, but for the missionary community.

MR. MUILENBURG: And certain kinds of medicine which certain of our people needed. So it was decided that I should go to Hong Kong, take a quick trip there, and then fly back with this stuff. Well, when I got to Hong Kong I learned that the Communists had made a very sudden push and had surrounded--pretty much surrounded--the Amoy harbor. Although they hadn't taken Kulangsu or Amoy yet, they were pressing on them. And that the regular scheduled airlines were no longer going into Amoy, and that the boat services had stopped, which meant that Virginia and our two children were there. Bessie Bruce may have told you something about this, I don't know.

VAN WYK: I haven't heard about this.

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, anyway, my problem then being in Hong Kong was how to get back into Amoy because I could hardly tolerate the thought of Virginia and the children being there while I was out. And I frantically tried to find somebody who would fly me--one of the Chennault Tiger people--to fly me back in, but they said no, they wouldn't risk it. Well, I heard that there would be a better chance from Taiwan, so I decided to go to Taiwan even though I didn't have a visa for getting in there. I persuaded the airlines to sell me a ticket. And I still think this is only the grace of God that I got into Taiwan because when we got off the plane I simply walked past the immigration people and nobody stopped me in the confusion, I guess. Maybe this was happening more often than I realized, but anyway, without a visa I entered Taiwan and immediately hunted up the Canadian and English Presbyterian missionaries, and they told me where I could find one of these

Flying Tiger fellows who might fly me back into Amoy, just over the Taiwan straits. Well, I finally went to this office, and a fellow came out and talked to me, and he turned out to be an American with a Chinese name who spoke like a southern American black, and that's exactly what he was. His father was a Chinese laundry man and his mother was an American black from Atlanta. And in his southern drawl he said, "Yes, I'll fly you." We tried to fly that afternoon, but he couldn't get the gasoline from the Nationalist air force. He said, "I think I can get some during the night," so whether he stole it or what have you, I don't know, but anyway, the next morning we were ready to fly, and we took this Cessna plane in, and as we circled over the Amoy harbor and the Amoy airfield, we could see the mortar shells exploding on the airfield. And I thought sure the guy would never dare to land under these circumstances, but he was very cool, and in between mortar shots he slid to the ground and opened the door and threw my bag out, and I jumped out and he took off again, hardly stopping the plane. So I was left out in the middle of the airfield with these Nationalist soldiers all around wondering who in the heck this fellow was. They all came running out with their guns to check me out, and I told them who I was, and they were pretty amazed that this person would be coming back into China under those circumstances. Anyway, I called up Virginia from the airfield, and she was very happy and relieved that I was back.

MRS. MUILENBURG: That's an understatement. While he was gone, Bessie Bruce came over and stayed with me and the two children, and we used to walk on the veranda in the evenings, at night, and here were the tracer bullets just lighting up the sky, and we heard the guns and noise and just didn't know, you know, at what time they would come in. But, how many days were you gone? Do you remember?

MR. MUILENBURG: I was gone maybe a week.

MRS. MUILENBURG: So anyway, I was glad when he came back.

VAN WYK: Did you have any instructions or any advice from the American Consulate on what to do when and if the Communists did come in?

MRS. MUILENBURG: They had advised us to leave much earlier, but we were given to understand, at least I had the impression, that if it would become very dangerous that we might get some help in being evacuated. Did you have that impression? Maybe that was earlier.

MR. MUILENBURG: No, they told us that if you stayed it's your own risk, and they wiped their hands pretty much of any responsibility for us. But it was a pretty wild time when the Communists were poised to make their amphibious attack on Kulangsu. They had a barrage, an artillery barrage, for almost two days before they actually made their amphibious landing. We, ub foreseeing this, had dug a shelter into the side of the mountain. Our house was built up right against the side of a hill. It went direct forward and then made a left-handed turn into the side, so even if shells came into the entryway we would still be protected because we had made a left angle turn. So we spent a lot of our time in that bomb shelter.

VAN WYK: Was this just your family, or was this other missionaries in the area as well who shared this shelter?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes, there was another missionary family that shared it with us.

VAN WYK: Was that ever a necessity? Were there bombs, shells, close enough to you?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh yes. We had to make use of that. And the night that they finally made their attack it was a pretty horrendous experience.

MRS. MUILENBURG: We were all barricaded inside the living room; all the servants came in from their houses behind, and there were three families in those apartments at that time. And I think we were all more or less together in one place, and we put the chairs and so forth around to keep stray bullets out. Not that they were going to be particularly shooting at us, but there were all kinds of shells flying around, you know, just here and there.

MR. MUILENBURG: And we were right up on the top of a hill, so we were fairly exposed.

MRS. MUILENBURG: And then the take-over happened during the night. We weren't aware at just what time it happened. The next morning I remember looking out, saw a different kind of uniform, and that's the only way we knew. But the Liberation Army, as they called themselves, were very polite and very well-mannered.

MR. MUILENBURG: They came right into our yard, a group of them, and set up anti-aircraft guns and machine guns right on the hill behind our house. And from that point on they were in control. But in some ways our greatest danger was to come because the Nationalists, in their bases in Taiwan, began bombing Kulangsu in an effort to dislodge them, or just to cause trouble.

MRS. MUILENBURG: They tried to ruin all the public facilities, you know, like gas, and electric and water supplies.

MR. MUILENBURG: One morning we were having breakfast, and suddenly the ceiling fell in on us, right on our table. And this was a Nationalist plane

which had dropped a bomb right close to our house, and the reverberations of the explosion caused quite a bit of damage in the house. Broke windows. . .

MRS. MUILENBURG: It was months before the children could hear airplanes without looking for a place to run.

MR. MUILENBURG: So this was the beginning of the Communist era for us.

VAN WYK: Did things change very quickly in Kulangsu as far as your daily life went, in terms of experiencing more control over the area? More government?

MR. MUILENBURG: Oh yes. They exerted very strong control immediately. Their army was well-entrenched, and their political government was changed, and they were very much in charge.

MRS. MUILENBURG: There were restriction as to where we could and couldn't go, even within that limited area. We had the experience of one single missionary fellow who had come just before the communists took over, and he and someone else just wanted to get away, went out and thought they'd go to the beach. Unfortunately, they blundered onto some kind of military installation. However, they didn't realize they were there. They were taking pictures just for their own pleasure. And then they were arrested and taken to prison that night, and John was. . .Someone came to get you, or were you telephoned? I don't remember. Anyway, John had to appear and be a witness as to their character and what their intentions were, and so forth, and then finally you had to sign as a sort of bond for their good behavior or something. Wasn't that involved?

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes. We had to make a statement admitting our guilt in doing what they had done. We were definitely forced to stay within very

strict limits, and it began to be quite unpleasant to get out on the street. People, our friends, no longer especially cared to recognize us. We weren't welcome in church.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I can remember some incidents of rock-throwing, pebbles, but. . .

VAN WYK: By children?

MRS. MUILENBURG: I don't know. I wasn't ever sure. Probably children because they were beginning to be indoctrinated in school.

VAN WYK: What finally made you decide to leave?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well, I think the pressure grew, and we became more aware of the embarrassment we were becoming for the Chinese Christians---that we could leave, really, anytime we wanted to, but they would have to live there afterwards and suffer the consequences of having been close friends with us. And I guess they pretty much said this when they were asked. And then I was pregnant and the baby was due in four months, and we just weren't sure what the medical facilities would be. Let's see, was Dr. Holleman still there?

MR. MUILENBURG: No.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well, of course there were Chinese doctors who were perfectly good enough, I suppose, but I guess I had some hesitancy about what might happen, so that was another incentive for us to leave. But mainly it was because we felt that we were not really helping anymore, and it wasn't a matter of standing shoulder to shoulder with them and mutually depending upon God to bring a better nation, but that they could do it better without

us. They'd feel better without us. That was really the reason.

MR. MUILENBURG: And I think another very important factor was the outbreak of the Korean War, and the charges that America was using germ warfare, which the Chinese believed. I don't know that it's ever been proved, whether or not it was done or not, but anyway, the Chinese generally believed that we were using germ warfare in that area, and the intensity of anti-American feeling became very great. And it was after that that we realized there was no hope within the immediate foreseeable future of really having a role to play there.

VAN WYK: Was the intensity of the anti-American feeling greater do you think in the Amoy area than it would be off in the country somewhere? Do you think you felt it a lot harder than some of the other missionaries who were out in the country?

MRS. MUILENBURG: I think the people upcountry had a harder time than we did.

MR. MUILENBURG: I wouldn't say that we had an easier time.

MRS. MUILENBURG: You wouldn't say that we had an easier time?

MR. MUILENBURG: No. I don't think we had an easier time.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well, I was just thinking--weren't some missionaries upcountry imprisoned, or imprisoned in their houses, or things like that, and we weren't?

MR. MUILENBURG: I think that had to do with the history of the individual, for example, people who had been there many years like Dr Poppen, who had held administrative roles in the schools and in the churches, and the treasurer. I guess Mr. Koeppe was the treasurer, and these men were much

more vulnerable to charges and counter-charges because they had been there and had opportunity then to make enemies for one, and this was a golden opportunity to get even with people, make charges, and so on.

VAN WYK: Were you ever confronted by charges?

MR. MUILENBURG: No. As a matter of fact, when we applied to leave, the person who was in charge of foreign affairs in the Amoy area was a woman, and she had a considerable understanding of missions. She went to a mission school in north China. She understood English well and also French. She was a very sophisticated woman. And she came to our house several times and tried to persuade us not to leave. She said, "There is a place for you here if you will accept whole-heartedly what we're trying to do in making a new society. Why don't you stay and ride the wave of the future rather than to go back into the backwash of American decadence," and so on. And so, how sincere she was in this I don't know, but this is the line which we got. And as a matter of fact, we had a hard time getting permission to leave because of her, but she finally decided she would. But I remember when she came and talked to us.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I remember.

VAN WYK: Was the decision completely up to you, or did you consult with other missionaries or with the Board before you left China?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Completely up to us.

MR. MUILENBURG: Yes, we had a free hand at that point. But I think most of the missionaries in China after the Korean War decided that there wasn't a lot of point in staying any longer. Of course, we didn't know what the eventuality would be there, and it could have had much worse repercussions.

Those who did stay after the Korean War, many of them were put in prison and had a hard time there. Many of them were not given permission to leave. What about your family? Did they leave after the Communists?

VAN WYK: After the Communists, right. I don't know about how they got permission.

MR. MUILENBURG: I suppose you've heard a great deal of this kind of story from your parents.

VAN WYK: That's why it's interesting.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Yes. I would think so.

VAN WYK: What was your exit from China like? Did you go straight out of Amoy, or did you have to travel down to Hong Kong?

MRS. MUILENBURG: We left from Amoy, and after we got permission, then the next hurdle was to get a ship that would be willing to take us. By that time, as John said, all commercial shipping had stopped. The last commercial ship that had left had been fired on by the Nationalists within our view. And as a matter of fact, one of the British nurses who went out, Joyce Beebe, had figured in saving the lives of some of the people that had been wounded. So, the only ships that took passengers out were blockade runners because there was this blockade by the Nationalists. And ships, or little boats, would come in under cover of darkness and bring fuel, supplies, and then cover themselves up with branches of trees, and go out then the next night, or whenever they unloaded, with whatever passengers were aboard. Well, they didn't want to take a pregnant woman for one thing, but they finally, after we signed papers releasing them of any kind of responsibility, said okay. So we had to be searched by the Communists before we got on

board. I remember they took us, each one, and a woman frisked me and didn't want us taking out any treasures from China. But the ship's captain decided it was too dangerous that first night, so we went back to the place where we were living. And the servants--I never will forget this--the servants were trailing along with us, you know, back and forth, back and forth, three nights. The third night we went out, wasn't that it? But two nights they went through all this rigamarole, and they said, "No, their guns are firing", or their planes, and it isn't safe to go tonight, so we have to wait till the next night. The servants were crying; I remember Hung-a's young wife was crying. I think she was pregnant, too. And they were so sad, and so this was sort of a pitiful procession that kept up for two nights. Of course, the servants were in a very vulnerable position, having worked for foreigners.

Well, we finally got off on the third night. Immediately we had to go below decks, and all lights out, and it was close down there in this very hot, stuffy cabin until we got out into the international free waters. And I don't remember. . . Oh, I think at one point search lights were played on us, but apparently didn't pick us up because it was a small boat. John left us at one point and crawled up on deck just to see what was going on. Was that when you saw. . .

MR. MUILENBURG: We had passed by Quemoy, which the Nationalists have held to this very day, and we had to really pass under the guns that were on Quemoy, and this was the dangerous part.

MRS. MUILENBURG: But anyway, the next morning we were out in clear waters, and it was free international waters. That was a great feeling to be out there and feeling safe.

VAN WYK: Then that boat took you to Hong Kong?

MRS. MUILENBURG: To Hong Kong. And there we waited for three weeks, I think, until we could get passage on another, on a ship going to the United States, because the people were coming out of Seoul, Korea. Things were very, very jammed in Hong Kong. And we finally were put on the Wilson, the President Wilson ship, with a lot of refugees from Seoul, Korea.

VAN WYK: If you were to do it all over agin, start again as young missionaries, would you do things differently than you did, or would you have the mission do things differently than they did in China when you were there?

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well, one always feels, I suppose, that we would like to do things differently if we had the knowledge then that we have now. I wish that I had become much more involved. I, of course, was very busy studying the language, and I was making progress with the language. But I wish that I had had more actual experiences those first--I guess I was there three and a half years. I wish I had had more actual interpersonal relations with the Chinese. But without a good working ability of the language, it just isn't possible.

VAN WYK: Did you have any specific complaints about the way the mission was running in China?

MR. MUILENBURG: No, I think that I don't have any clear feeling that they were on the wrong track. I think for one thing we had joined in with the Church of Christ in China, which was certainly the right step, but we were in the process of eliminating the mission as such. We still had the Amoy mission there, but I think we saw and the Board saw the handwriting on the wall for that, but it was time that mission organizations as such in a

country where the church has been there for a hundred years or so really had outlived their usefulness. And I feel we were making giant strides in the right step on that, I think I don't have complaints about our Board. I think they treated us very well.

MRS. MUILENBURG: The Board treated us better. . .

MR. MUILENBURG: And their policies were basically sound. They were in keeping with the trends which were moving at that time.

MRS. MUILENBURG: And I felt that the older missionaries there were very helpful and had a good perspective on mission trends and on life, and the way to function in China.

VAN WYK: So you didn't have real conflicts with the older missionaries on your ideas on relations to Chinese?

MRS. MUILENBURG: No. Well, I didn't feel that. I don't know if John did.

MR. MUILENBURG: I don't have any strong impressions that there was a great gap between the younger missionaries and the older ones. I think generally we would have favored moving a little faster in the area of what we called the devolution, of giving more authority to Chinese, but by and large I felt that our older missionaries were very much with it and were not paternalistic in their views. They had much deeper feelings for the way things used to be and for the so-called "good old days"--if they ever were good--when there was less confusion and when the work of the church seemed to be moving ahead more smoothly. But those days, you'd have to go back quite far because even beginning in the late thirties with the Japanese coming into China, social conditions became very chaotic--social and political. And this had its effect on the development of the church, too.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Of course, the church where we were in Amey was run by Chinese. It wasn't run by missionaries. It was, . . . Certainly the pastors were Chinese.

MR. MUILENBURG: The major church positions in Chinese churches, and certainly on the national level, it was all Chinese.

MRS. MUILENBURG: So there wasn't any question. . . I don't see quite how your question fits here of wishing that we would have allowed the Chinese to have more power or authority.

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, I think by that time, as long as you had a mission body meeting and making observations on the life of a church without any Chinese present, that this is not good. And of course, missionary assignments were made primarily by the mission.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Well that's true.

MR. MUILENBURG: There was some consultation with the Chinese, but there was a kind of an autonomous mission life as well as the church life, and this was often in conflict with what the Chinese themselves would have liked. And I can remember in our meetings how the Chinese leaders were openly criticized and sometimes ridiculed for their incompetence.

VAN WYK: Do you see any hope for a renewal or a growth of Christianity in China today?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, they say that there is a life of the church in China, that it's an underground, incognito kind of existence. And people who do visit China say that there is still a remnant there which is being faithful. Humanly speaking, it certainly doesn't look very good with the young people being really led away from allegiance to the church. What the future can

be without new blood coming in is problematical. We do know that there are no formal places for Christians to gather together. No churches, I think, except for one or two in Peking for foreigners. What God has in mind for the Chinese is another matter. Humanly speaking, I don't see a lot of hope for the future.

VAN WYK: I have no more questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

MR. MUILENBURG: Well, I would say that the experience of being in China for, well, for me it was about four and a half years, I think. Virginia was a little less--was an enriching one, one that I'm glad we had. It was really a relatively small segment of our life, but it was an intense period because of the great changes which were taking place in China, and for the reverberations of what happened there for world history. And to have been there, to have been a part of it, was very exciting, really, and we ever since have been interested in China and in Chinese things, and the developments in China. Although our subsequent work in the Philippines for sixteen years, although it was with an interest in the welfare of the Chinese community in the Philippines, still, our work was in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and actually, our associations there were more with Filipinos than with Chinese. Although the first period of years when we were at Silliman University, we worked primarily with the Chinese students in the university.

MRS. MUILENBURG: I think being in China certainly colored our whole lives. As John say, it made us have a lifelong interest in Chinese people and Chinese things. Throughout our time in the Philippines we had Chinese friends and an interest in what was going on in there that we never would have had had we not been there ourselves.

MR. MUILENBURG: And to have learned the Chinese language and mastered a certain number of Chinese characters so that we could do some reading and to have entered into that ancient culture with all that that means has been a very enriching experience. So, we're glad we went.

MRS. MUILENBURG: Right.

MR. MUILENBURG: Part of our pilgrimage.

VAN WYK: Thanks very much.